

A Reminder and a Memorial [Book Review]

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The Quality of Life: the Peckham Approach to Human Ethology. Innes H Pearse. (Pp 194; £6 50.) Scottish Academic Press. 1979.

The biologist studies man as a physical organism existing in a space-time world of measurable dimensions. This organism has the ability to adapt to changes in its environment; to the processes of growth, development and aging; and to disease. The main objectives of medicine have been to help both adaptation and defence. Prevention through hygiene and immunisation, drugs, surgical removals, and replacements-all these make their contributions, which have increased in complexity and expense, disappointing Beveridge's hope in 1949 that a National Health Service plus rehabilitation (then a novelty) would so improve health that the Service would wither away.

To avoid and prevent ill health are worthy aims; to promote health is also worthy, but something different. It was to study healthy living that Dr Scott Williamson, Dr Innes Pearse, and their colleagues devised the Peckham experiment, of which this book is at once a reminder and a memorial. They wanted to study *Homo sapiens* in his natural habitat and they began their exploration as biologists. In an initial family club of 150 families they noted that disorders, however skillfully treated, recurred in the environment out of which the disorder had arisen. So, in 1935, they designed a laboratory in which human beings could be observed growing up and creating new

families. The centre, purpose-built, combined maximum visibility throughout, flexibility, and free access to all members. By the outbreak of war 800-900 families had grown their own lively social life. Many of the original families rejoined when the centre reopened after the war. It finally closed in 1951. Meanwhile, the observers had invented a new role.

Looking at living

Biology preoccupied with measurable data was good enough for studying existence. The study of "living" needed a new kind of observer, the bionomist, intent on assessing the quality of life and helping "to cultivate the inherent biological potential of the individual from the beginning of life." A new science was born – ethology.

The doctor turned bionomist had hard lessons to learn. Merely as an observer he had to discard authority along with interference. He would give information on request, but his task was limited to observing the action patterns and the interactions of the family living in its environment as a functional whole. He was no longer searching-by history and physical examination-for evidence of disease; but how to recognise the signs and symptoms of health remained, at first, a mystery. Gradually the bionomist developed insight and resources, then a theory, and, finally-because the shackles of the biologist's intellectual discipline could not be wholly loosed-an anatomical hypothesis.

The one condition for a member family was a periodic health overhaul. According to the strict criteria used, 90% of the 4002 individuals had some pathological condition, of which two-thirds were unaware, masked as it was by compensation. The point of departure for the bionomist's main observations was the formation of a new family

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pair, their development as marriage partners, pregnancy, the birth and subsequent development of the baby, and the family interactions as the family developed.

In addition, the interactions between individual members of the family and other members of the experimental community, and between one family and the others were all observed and recorded.

At some stage along the way certain fundamental ideas took root. The wish and readiness to take responsibility, easily undermined by outside interference and direction, were seen as vital. Because the basic unit of the community was the family, much thought was given to preparation for and management of childbirth. The pre-eminent need was for suitable environmental circumstances so that the nurtural functions of the parents, one of the most powerful incentives in living, could develop spontaneously. The result was natural childbirth with minimal use of drugs and, with Sir William Gilliat's approval, the 48-hour obstetric hospital admission. The expectant mother had prepared herself emotionally through relationships with young mothers and their babies in the centre.

The bionomists saw each family as having the potential to nurture the baby, and each baby as having the potential to develop its capacities-given favourable circumstances. The fruits of observation fed to the intellect are hypotheses. To study the quality of life and to form ideas needs a new vocabulary for expression and discussion. The baby has the *capacity* to exercise a *faculty* and a right moment, an *appetitive phase*, for this development. The newborn baby has the capacity both to ingest and to digest food. Although the capacity is there, the baby has to learn by experience to translate capacity into faculty. Neither ingestion nor digestion can be dismissed as automatic acts because they are sensitive developmental faculties easily disturbed by giving the "wrong" food and mismanaging mother and baby.

The same approach is appropriate for later learning. In the centre, where the instruments for hobbies were always at hand, a child would

suddenly seize on a piece of equipment, previously ignored, such as roller skates or a bicycle. This new and sudden interest produced a state almost of ecstasy and, for the next 10 days or so, the child would concentrate on the new achievement. As suddenly, the interest ceased. When, later, the instrument was used again, the child had an even greater skill than when it was discarded. The appetitive phase, given opportunity, had led to spontaneous *facultisation*-a lesson here for teaching and learning. In an environment rich both materially and in opportunity for emotional and social interaction, undreamed-of interests and skills developed and families became confident in their own ability to act-reasonably. It was a permissive society but, unlike the world at large, one with internal discipline, where the appetitive phase met not frustration but the opportunity for facultisation.

In the search for the source of human behaviour, another faculty, *eclectivity*, and a driving force, *aesthesia*, were recognised. Like the other faculties, *eclectivity*-the ability to choose "what is specifically apposite to the present specific need of the individual"- awaits only exercise and practice. Opportunity for choice must be given from the earliest hours of life. The importance of "the feelings" in determining human actions could not be gainsaid. The response to the senses, to what is received from outside, has long been studied, but the feelings that originate within need a new concept and, if possible, a map of communication pathways in the body from their point of origin. Dr Scott Williamson named this force *aesthesia* and suggested that the embryonic yolk sac, "the antecedent of the mucous membrane of the gut," provided the feeling circuit.

Enthusiastic group study

Even if the explanatory theory is not accepted, the observations recorded and the discussion of their meaning are valuable additions to the study of human behaviour and of the needs of individuals and families for healthy development within an orderly, although not an ordered,

society. The enthusiasm of observers and observed shines from the pages. It is all rather like the Garden of Eden before the unfortunate incident with the apple. If the quality of life is to be assured in terms of the full development of human potential several questions arise. Although much is made of "wholeness," it is the circumscribed wholeness of an individual within a family within the Peckham community.

In the larger world outside the Peckham community the human potential for aggression and violence is quite as evident as the potential for artistic creation. Can the concepts of good and evil be dismissed? Is good only what serves the interest of the whole community, or is there another-a spiritual-dimension which, in the search for improving the quality of life, we ignore at our peril? Biologists and bionomists are not theologians, but is not the preoccupation of an individual with the development of his own full potential reminiscent of the self-regarding of original sin? Is the enthusiasm of a group for a common purpose-at Peckham, the study of health-

sufficient to direct individuals and families to "good" ends? Is there any way in which the Peckham observations and theories could help us to understand and relieve the problems of, for example, inner cities? This book certainly shows the power of community of purpose, the importance of participation and of opportunities to choose in the development of responsible behaviour both within families and within society, and the necessity for the enrichment of the environment of human living.

We speak of the life sciences and of the art of living. The Peckham experiment for the promotion of health has made a serious scientific study of living with its many variables and personal relationships. The late Dr Innes Pearse has presented on behalf of her colleagues a new vocabulary and a new method which should encourage and inspire us to add one more to the life sciences, perhaps the most important of all if Homo sapiens is to survive-the science of living. Biologist and bionomist may need reinforcements for further studies.

